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AUTHOR Smoot, Joyce
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ABSTRACT

At the Writing Center of the Virginia Technical Institute and State University, several methods of publicizing the writing center and developing good public relations have been developed. Through the writing center's brochure or an article in the faculty/staff newspaper, it can be made clear that writing center staff would be willing to talk to any group interested in hearing about the center's work. Classrooms, honorary and professional society meetings, and special programs for faculty and students would be appropriate occasions for explaining the writing center's work. Administrators, staff members, and adjunct groups (such as extension agents) are also concerned with writing. The director for program development in a continuing education department would be able to arrange presentations. Opportunities for presentations can also be found in the surrounding business community through such groups as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, and American Business Women's Association. Subjects for different kinds of presentations would vary, but possible topics include the center itself, the writing process, answering essay questions, preparing resumes and job application letters, or writing style. The rewards of such presentations are clear: visibility of the writing center is increased both on and off campus, while current ideas about writing are presented. (DF)

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Joyce Smoot
Virginia Tech

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Public Relations and the Writing Center Director: Making the Center Visible On and Off Campus

As writing center directors, we all realize the importance of public relations. Particularly if your center operates on a referral basis for tutoring, as ours does, the center's work must be known and respected. Specifically, also, you want people to understand that your tutors can do more than instruct writers about grammar, punctuation, and spelling: they can also help with larger concerns such as logic, style, organization, detail selection, topic choice, and research strategies.

How do you go about making your center's capabilities widely known? Our center staff and I have found that we can make ourselves visible and increase understanding of our work by giving writing workshops and presentations. We have given such presentations to numerous kinds of groups, both on and off campus. I would like to discuss the kinds of groups we have addressed and the nature of the presentations, and then suggest some guidelines for preparing and presenting workshops.

Through your center's promotional brochure, and perhaps also in an article in your faculty/staff newspaper, you can make it clear that you are willing to talk to any group interested in hearing about your Center's work or about any writing related topic.

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Such groups include, of course, classes of all levels and in all subjects. You may speak often to freshman and upper-level writing classes. In addition, work to cultivate less traditional classroom opportunities. For example, professors of undergraduate seminars which introduce students to the professional concerns of a particular curriculum might want you to talk about resume preparation or research strategies. And seminars of introduction to graduate study in various fields, from sociology to civil engineering, offer appropriate occasions for discussing the complex writing concerns of graduate students.

Outside the classroom, look for opportunities to talk to both faculty and student groups. Honorary, professional, and social societies all may have an interest in hearing about what your center offers or about writing related topics. As you talk with colleagues from around campus , mention possible writing presentation topics; program chairs will often be delighted to learn of your availability. After you give such presentations, be sure to stay for the social hour: one of our staff members, for whom English is a second language, spoke briefly last year at a meeting of international graduate students and then stayed to meet students socially. I am convinced that this personal contact made these students feel comfortable about coming to our writing center.

Just as program chairs of organized societies will often welcome you, so coordinators of special programs for faculty and students are often interested in having a speaker on writing related topics. For

example, I spoke one summer to students in a special program for minority juniors and seniors from state colleges and univesities who were considering attending graduate school; several of these students later came to our writing center for tutoring. (Make a real effort to stay informed about such special programs: you may find opportunities for significant writing center involvement, as we did. For example, our university also has a special summer program for some students who may need help in making the transition from high school to college. Several of our writing center staff members taught in this program, and I, as Writing Center Director, served as coordinator for the English component of the program. This contact was valuable to our center because of the visibility it gave staff members with these students, many of whom are now regular Writing Center users.)

In addition to faculty and student groups, other on campus audiences may be receptive to writing related presentations; remember that administrators, staff members, and adjunct groups (such as extension agents) are also concerned with writing. Last year, for example, we did a three part seminar for our university's Office of Institutional Research and a one time presentation for the university's finance office. We also spoke to a group of extension agents assembled on campus for a seminar. Don't overlook the possibility of trade-offs: if a staff member speaks to a group from the personnel office on guidelines for clear writing, a personnel officer can then speak to an English department business writing class on resume guidelines and standards.

Possibilities for similar presentations and workshops exist also in the larger community; many universities list extension among their stated purposes. Such off-campus work can foster respect for the writing center in the administrators who are responsible for center funding decisions.

If your school has a continuing education center, you might contact the director for program development in that office and tell him or her of your willingness to give such presentations. The program development director can help you by providing guidelines on content, audience, and presentation style. One possible audience is employees of state government. If you are interested in working with state employees, consider contacting someone in your state's office of personnel and training: you will probably be given guidelines for submitting a proposal.

During 1984, as result of such a proposal, one of our center staff members conducted eight two-day workshops on writing, given for state employee groups ranging from water control officers to probation officals. Some states offer two types of such workshops: open, which employees of any state agency may attend, and in-house, which are available only for employees of a particular agency. The Virginia Office of Personnel and Training currently offers two levels of writing workshops: Basic Writing, for clerical employees, and Effective Writing, for managers.

Opportunities for presentations can also be found in the surrounding business community: once again, your university's

continuing education center can help you get started. To make the availability of your services known, you might contact the public relations dean of your business school, who may already have a well established list of contacts. You can also publicize the availability of such presentations as a footnote to talks on writing-related topics to groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, and American Business Women's Association.

As a result of having spent years thinking about audience analysis, logical supporting detail, coherent organization, diction, nuances, sentence structure, the writing process, and standard grammar and punctuation guidelines, you have accumulated a valuable and useful body of knowledge. You may need to spend some time thinking about specific applications of that knowledge, but this can be readily accomplished. Volunteer to teach your school's courses in business and technical writing. If such teaching is not feasible, plan to spend some time surveying current textbooks in both business and technical writing.

Subjects for all these kinds of presentations will, of course, vary greatly, depending on audience and occasion. For classes and on-campus groups, one of your main purposes will probably be to discuss the writing center itself: what it can and cannot offer and how it operates. Other appropriate presentation subjects include the writing process, choosing suitable essay topics, conducting research (perhaps given in conjunction with a librarian), incorporating quotations, answering essay questions, and preparing resumes and job application letters.

Style is often an appropriate topic choice: audiences respond best when you discuss style very specifically, giving them particular constructions and diction choices to think about. Beware of setting yourself up as a giver of iron clad rules about style: many writers are bound by the conventions of their particular field.

For a general discussion of style, particularly for audiences who do business or government writing, consider using Richard Lanham's videotapes, Revising Prose and Revising Business Prose. For a group of technical writers, consult technical writing texts for particular guidelines. I have found Chapter 9, "Achieving a Clear Style," from Reporting Technical Information by Houp & Pearsall particularly sensible and comprehensive.

In a discussion of bureaucratic writing, examples of effective and ineffective prose can be helpful in getting your point across. One excellent source of such examples is Simply Stated, the monthly newsletter of the Document Design Center in Washington, D.C. You might also use locally available examples.

For extended workshops, you will need exercises and simulated writing situations. If your workshop budget will not permit a book purchase, write to publishers of books containing useful materials: most will grant limited reprint permission. You might also look for locally available materials, perhaps produced by your writing center.

If you have taught your school's business writing course, you have a headstart for business workshops. If not, ask people who have

taught the course for source recommendations. There are several available comprehensive business writing texts with well done exercises: try to find exercises which reflect the kinds of writing your participants do in their jobs. I use exercises from Business Communication: Theory and Technique by Richard Hatch.

Currently, the Virginia two day workshop for state managerial level employees covers tone, sentence structure, grammar and punctuation, style, paragraph structure, process, organization, usage, and spelling. Presenters use a combination of lecture, discussion, group revision exercises, and individual written response. To make the presentation specifically useful, presenters request that, before the workshop, participants send them a representative sample of the writing they do in their work.

Presentation style is critical in the success of workshops for adults: be supportive, never patronizing. A casual approach often works best. Many adults feel threatened by a writing workshop: they need to be put at ease. Our presenters use self-checking exercises to eliminate the possibility of embarrassment. Once they overcome their initial hesitancy, most adults business writers respond enthusiastically to discussions of writing.

The rewards of such presentations are clear: you can increase the visibility of your writing center both on and off campus while helping to spread current ideas about writing. Many adult writers are eager for current news about effective writing: they realize its usefulness (unlike some traditional students!) and welcome help.

I urge you, then, if you haven't already, to expand the scope of your writing center's operaton: both your center and others will benefit.

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